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Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani met with President Donald Trump in the White House on April 10. Now, Qatar is experiencing setbacks in its efforts to improve its standing in the U.S. | Mark Wilson/Getty Images

Key figures in Gulf crisis sever ties with Qatar

The defections are a setback in the monarchy's yearlong power struggle with its Middle East neighbors.

By BEN SCHRECKINGER | 06/07/2018 05:08 AM EDT

A New York businessman who played a crucial role in Qatar's efforts to win influence in the United

States has terminated his relationship with the Persian Gulf nation and is now condemning it as a threat to Middle East peace.

Joey Allaham, a Syrian-born restaurateur and entrepreneur who had been helping Qatar make politically useful investments and curry favor with the American Jewish community, told POLITICO that he has recently cut ties with the country.

“Qatar enjoys portraying themselves as the purveyor of peace in the region, but this could not be further from the truth,” Allaham said in a sharp reversal from his past position.

His defection comes at the same time that another top Qatari agent, Nick Muzin, a former adviser to Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), is also stopping work for the wealthy monarchy.

Their work and other Qatari efforts had been paying off, with the Trump administration softening its stance toward the country in recent months. The loss of their services is a setback to Qatar’s efforts to resolve a yearlong diplomatic crisis in the Persian Gulf and improve its standing in the U.S.

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Though his background is in the restaurant business and he has little political experience, Allaham had emerged in recent months as an important behind-the-scenes player in the stateside influence battle touched off by the Gulf crisis, which began last June when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar’s other neighbors jointly severed ties with the country over its close relationship with Iran, among other grievances.

Since then, the countries involved have invested heavily in influence operations in the United States.

As part of his charm offensive on Qatar’s behalf, Allaham said, he set up meetings for Qatari officials and “distributed several charitable donations as an introductory show of goodwill.” Allaham said he did not lobby any public officials or conduct any public relations work.

Efforts by Allaham, who is Jewish, included outreach to prominent American advocates of Israel, including Alan Dershowitz, an informal Trump adviser, and Mort Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, who is a longtime ally of White House national security adviser John Bolton. Dershowitz and Klein both traveled to Qatar in January to discuss improved relationships with the Jewish community, a move that stoked controversy in Israel and among American Zionists because of Qatar's support for the Palestinian fundamentalist organization Hamas and the monarchy's close ties to Iran.

In a further blow to Qatar's diplomatic efforts, Klein on Wednesday backed away from any rapprochement, reiterating his condemnation of the country. "I've lost confidence that they're at all serious about changing," he told POLITICO.

In shutting the door on any opening with Qatar, Klein cited the invitation of Yusuf al-Qaradawi — a Muslim Brotherhood leader who has expressed support for suicide bombings against Israeli citizens and is banned from entering the U.S. — to a banquet hosted by Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani last week in the capital, Doha.

Allaham also cited the Islamic preacher's invitation to the official banquet among his reasons for defecting. Jassim Al-Thani, a spokesman for the Qatari Embassy in Washington, declined to comment.



GOP fundraiser: Ex-American spy helped Qatar hack emails

By JOSH MEYER

It is not clear why Muzin, who had been working closely with Allaham, ended his work for the monarchy. In announcing the end of his work for the country on Wednesday, Muzin struck a more conciliatory tone.

"I am proud of the work we did to foster peaceful dialogue in the Middle East, to increase Qatar's defense and economic ties with the United States, and to expand humanitarian support of Gaza," he wrote on Twitter. "I look forward to speaking out in the days ahead about the challenges we faced and what more needs to be done." Muzin declined to comment further.

Allaham told POLITICO that he would register with the Justice Department as a foreign agent for the work he performed for Qatar. Muzin has been registered as an agent of Qatar since September.

In reversing course on Qatar, Allaham also implicated Ahmed Al-Rumaihi, a former Qatari

diplomat who until recently led Qatar Investments, a \$100 billion Qatari sovereign wealth fund. Last month, former business partners of Rumaihi accused him in a California lawsuit of using an investment in a basketball league led by a friend of Steve Bannon, President Donald Trump's former chief strategist, to gain influence with the U.S. administration.

According to Allaham, Rumaihi asked him to "lie to the press that Steve Bannon had maliciously created the lawsuit, when in fact he was working to mediate the lawsuit out of court." A spokesman for Rumaihi's company described the allegation as "completely false."

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